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Stained Purple

Abstract: Patriarchy ensures the hegemonic rule of men over women. Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple* brings into light the traumatic experiences of the characters, especially that of the women characters, and shows to the world how the lives of the African American women were affected by male supremacy. The intention of this paper is to analyse *The Color Purple* using Trauma Theory. Trauma Theory states that the trauma that a person goes through at one point in life gets reflected later in life in the form of nightmares and a general dysfunctioning in the coherent, patterned, harmonious world that an individual knows of. This paper analyses how some of the characters like the protagonist Celie was affected by the terror and the sufferings that they went through and also how these get reflected in their personalities and behavioural patterns in a later period in life.

Key Terms: Trauma theory, trauma. *The Color Purple*, patriarchy, male dominance, racism.

What is universal in the man-woman relationship throughout history is the unquestioned authority invested upon the despotic husband-father figure over its women subjects. He is given the right to kiss or kill them. This authority, most of the time, is severely exploited by the patriarchs and has been accepted by the women under the patriarchal system as their right and rule. Therefore domestic violence has been a part of various cultures around

the globe. African communities in their native lands as well as in that of the colonisers have exhibited this trend. Thus an Afro-American woman suffers from the violence from both the colonial masters as well as from their own husbands and fathers. Various writers have pointed out this matter through their writings.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is one such work that portrays this violence toward women and the trauma that it creates in their minds. The novel, which is epistolary in style, develops through the life of the protagonist Celie and her letters to God at first and then to her sister Nettie. The novel shows Celie's progression through the domestic sexual violence, she undergoes and the violence that her husband inflicts on her for the sole reason of being his wife. The novel shows the condition of not just Celie but also that of many women in the contemporary society. It shows the characters evolutions from being virtually mute into strong, independent women surpassing the sufferings that they underwent.

Perhaps the most traumatized character in the whole of *The Color Purple* is the protagonist herself. She is raped at a young age by her stepfather whom she believed was her father. Her children were taken away from her; she had to suffer domestic violence at the house of her husband. She was also put through the agony of separation from her only sister by her cruel husband. An element that connects the entire history of Celie's trauma is perhaps her sexuality. Celie's detest for men seems to be a product of the trauma that she had to suffer from her father and husband. The novel begins with the scene of Celie being raped by her step-father. He says "You better tell nobody but god. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker 3). The attack of the step father becomes the alien particle or the traumatic stressor that affects the young mind of Celie. In her letters to the God, Celie writes:

He [the step-father] never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up against my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing

inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying you better shut up and git used to it. (3)

Trauma theory states that the traumatic experience causes a disfunctioning of the regular, ordered life that its subject knows of. In the case of Celie, the rape has the same effect. Her knowledge of her father as a protector and supporter of the family is suddenly disrupted. She cannot understand or comprehend the ordinary situations after the rape. Celie points out, “But I don’t never git used to it [the rape]. And now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook” (3). Celie is badly affected by the rape, that the normal everyday functions seem absurd to her. Her ‘normal’ life seems so strange that she is not even able to address who her child’s father is. When her mother asks about her pregnancy Celie is genuinely confused about who the child’s father is. She wonders who it actually is. Celie writes to God “She[Celie’s mother] ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say” (4). The irony of the situation is to be noted. By declaring that Celie’s child is that of God, she is, in a way, calling God almighty a rapist and at the same time through her Walker is questioning the patriarchal God like superiority invested upon the father figure. This is also to be considered on the Christian background of Celie and that Christianity invests upon the father the position of the head of the family, the position of the leader, close to that of God.

Jenny Zetterberg in her Doctoral thesis “Trauma and Recovery: A Literature Study of Dr. Judith Herman’s Research and Treatment Methodology” points out that “the characteristic symptoms resulting from the exposure to the extreme trauma include... persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma...” (5). This seems to be the case with Celie. Her aversion to male genitalia seems to have sprung from this childhood sexual abuse. At one point in the novel Celie compares male sexual organ to a frog. She tells her husband “Take off they [men] pants, I say, and men look like frogs to me” (Walker 230). Her

dislike for men turns her homosocial. Though Celie preferred the company of women especially that of her sister Nettie, even before the sexual violence, the traumatic incident fastened her dislike for men drawing her away from them. Her disinterest is extended not only towards her stepfather and her husband, but also towards her step children and Shug's husband.

Celie's incomprehensibility towards the rape is expressed through her inability to react or feel. Jaya Dwivedi and Dolly Sharma in their "Silent Agonise of Black 'Celie' and Brown 'Jasmine' in America" notes that "Due to all these tribulations in her life Celie became stiff like wood, and her inner feelings were completely dead" (4). The experience of trauma which is not actually experienced and its memories turns Celie into a mute person. Other than her conversations to God through her letters, she remains silent for most of the part until she befriends Shug. This silencing happens under the pressure of the authoritative male figure. Dwivedi and Sharma point out that "in 'The Colour Purple' the colour is a symbol of bruises which appeared in Celie's body due to beatings inflicted upon, first by her father Alphonso and then by her husband" (4). The novel thus becomes the story of Celie's physical as well as mental bruises.

The post traumatic mind that undergoes tortures at her parents as well as at her husband's house attempts to externalise the internal trauma, by turning her mute and similar to a corpse. During one of her conversation with Sofia, Celie comments on her mental state: "I can't even remember the last time I felt mad, I say...Then I start to feel nothing at all (Walker 40). She repeatedly says that she is dead. When Harpo, her step-son experiences nightmares, Celie pats his back, trying to console him. But then Celie writes to God: "Everybody say how good I is to Mr.— children. I be good to them. But I don't feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not eve like patting a dog. It more like patting another piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferobe" (Walker 30). This shows not only the

inability of her mind to show affection towards the children of her oppressor, but also the inability of her traumatized mind to react to the sufferings of another human.

Perhaps the most intense reaction to the various physical, mental tortures that Celie undergoes is her reaction to the discovery of her sister Nettie's letters which were hidden by her husband Albert. Nettie is the only person that Celie was left with in her family after the death of her mother and the loss of her children and her husband was fully aware of that. Celie's initial reaction to Shug's accusation of Albert, of hiding the letters, is disbelief. When Shug says that Albert had been keeping Nettie's letters Celie says "Naw, I say. Mr.— mean sometimes, but he not that mean" (109). When she realizes the true state of events, her reaction to his deception comes unpredicted to even herself. For a second Celie loses control of herself and in that moment she tries to attack Albert. This deception of his was more than anything she could think of. Walker writes: "I [Celie] watch him so close, I begin to feel a lightening in the head. Fore I know anything I'm standing hind his chair with his razor open" (110). In the spur of the moment Celie's traumatised mind loses control over itself and her id or the natural instincts acts. In her letter to God, Celie writes,

All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble about the house crazy for Mr.— blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way. By time night come, I can't speak. Every time I open my mouth nothing come come out but a little burp (110).

When she realizes her husband's true colours, Celie lets go of her inhibitions and raises her voice against him. Celie is not only overcoming his control over her but is also attempting to get over the internalized roles and rules that were invested upon her by the patriarchal society. Her arguments with her husband Albert remind the readers of Heinrich Ibsen's character Dora, from his play *A Doll's House*. Celie's statements are similar to that of Dora's declaration of independence. Both the characters declare their freedom from the duties

which they were expected to fulfil. Both the muted Celie and doll like Dora find a voice. Jaya Dwivedi and Dolly Sharma in their essay point out, “Celie in the end accepts that the most important thing in life is love, admiration, enjoyment of the beauty that adds to happiness in life” (5) which were denied to her muted self. When Albert reminds her of what people say if she runs away, Shug Avery answers the question “Why any woman give a shit what people think is a mystery to me” (181). This particular letter could be seen as the testimony to the rise of Celie’s from her grave.

Celie in such instance seem hysterical. She acts like a mad woman who is possessed reminding the readers of Charlotte Bronte’s Bertha. Sigmund Freud’s and Joseph Breuer’s essay “On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena” shows that hysteria is a problem of repression. Repression of memories and feelings which were traumatic act as the cause of hysteria in most people. In the case of Celie, her repressed anger and disgust at her step-father and husband become externalized with the final blow, her husband’s deception. When Celie loses control of her own self and go crazy for the blood of Albert, it is Shug who turns her away from her madness and brings her back to her senses. It is also to be noted that it is Shug herself who facilitates Celie’s final explosion. Shug helped Celie to escape from her own uncontrollable madness. When Celie loses herself in a moment of hysteria, and retaliates to Albert’s attempts to abuse her verbally and physically, Shug saves Celie and brings her back to her senses. “Then I feel Shug shake me. Celie she say. And I come to myself” (187).

Religion is yet another factor that was swayed under the trauma that Celie went through. It is one of the core factors that stabilize a person from his or her younger years. Throughout all of Celie’s miseries she stayed close to God, taking Him to be her sole dependence. Yet, with the final blow Celie loses her faith even in that God. This is indicated by her shift from writing letters to God to writing letters to Nettie. When she reads her sister’s

letter stating the truth behind her family, Celie is so surprised and bewildered that she tempts even the readers to disbelieve in God for a second. Celie's last letter to God reads,

But I feel daze.

My daddy lunch. My mama crazy. All my little half- brothers and sisters no
kin to

me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa.

You [God] must be sleep (160).

The final accusation of Celie against God becomes a major turning point in the whole novel, because it wrecks Celie's foundation of religious faith as well as all that was taught to her by that religion including her wifely and womanly duties to her husband and family. Her experiences in her life taught her to distrust even the holiest of her beliefs, thus shaking Celie's world view from the very core of it. Only after her change of faith, into a more naturalistic approach, does her transformation into a new Celie happen.

Celie's children are yet another cause of her trauma. Her step-father takes her children away from Celie. In her second letter to God Celie writes about her step-father kidnapping her children "He [the step-father] took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods. Kill this one too, if he can" (4). Celie is hysterical over her children and what might have happened to them. Though she believes her children to be dead, her maternal instinct leads her to believe that they are alive and it is perhaps this instinct that helps her to find out her child and also to send her sister to her children's new family. The novel, however finds a solution to all of the problems that Celie had to face. Her 'Pa' was proved to be not her own father; she left her husband and moved away from her house becoming an entrepreneur. And finally she is reunited with her lost sister and her children. The final scene is one of harmony. They celebrate July 4th, the American Independence Day. And Celie celebrates it surrounded by all those who love her. And she is beginning yet another chapter

in her life. She says “But I don’t think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this is the youngest us ever felt” (261).

A notable study of the trauma in *The Color Purple* was done by Kate Dailey. Dailey in her “Three Models for Approaching Literatures of Trauma” analyses *The Color Purple* using Carol Christ’s four stages to self awakening from the conditions of trauma. Christ talks of nothingness, awakening, insight, new naming, as the four stages in the life of a traumatized character. In the case of Celie, these stages that help the character to grow out of the conditions can be easily found. Celie’s journey in the novel begins from her feelings of absolute self- depreciation. Celie’s story in the novel opens with overwhelming trauma which the reader can easily identify as a stage of ‘nothingness’. The sexual violence inflicted on her by her step father gives evidence to this. The next step of growth, the stage of growth is initiated through the

character Shug. Shug acts as the catalyst in Celie’s development into her wholeness and completeness. Dailey points out, “The process toward this independence begins when she develops a deep and lasting friendship and love affair with Shug Avery who teaches her of her worth purely by loving her and helping her to see life situations that she does not need to tolerate” (2).

The third stage of insight comes with Celie’s rejection of all the patriarchal powers including that of her husband. When she curses her husband by saying that “...everything that you touch will crumble” (187), she is rejecting all the authority that was exerted by him over her person. The most poignant step of Celie’s transformation is the change in her concept of God. Celie believed God to be “...big and old and tall and graybearded and white” (175). Shug’s influence helps Celie to see, “God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don’t know what looking for” (176). This

change from ‘He’ to an ‘It’ is the biggest change that encourages Celie’s growth. This is not just a change in the concept of what or who God is, but rather it is a part of the evolution that Celie undergoes from her internal submission to a male God, represented by both her husband and step-father, to a vision closer to nature.

The fourth and final stage is perhaps the most important stage in the case of a trauma victim. The stage ‘new naming’ is described by Kate Dailey as “a period of no longer internalizing the voices of a survivor’s oppression and instead orienting to the world as a whole, powerful human being, and not someone’s victim” (2). The escalation of Celie from her old self to a new being is illustrated in her strong affirmation of herself in replying to her husband’s verbal abuse. When her husband attempts to hurt her pride by calling her ugly, skinny, poor and a bad cook, Celie replies to him, “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly and can’t cook... But I’m here” (187). Celie’s new home also stands as a symbol of this new naming. The house with an address renews Celie’s identity. Dailey, that “Celie’s new naming occurs when she has made a new home for herself, is independently employed and self sufficient. She has a voice in her daily life and has separated herself from anyone who might hurt her” (2). When she notes down her address for her sister in one of the letters, it shows Celie’s newly acquired sense of identity brought to her by the new address. She grows to be a new human being through this new identity. The new house she builds for herself and her family also contributed to this sense of newness and the new birth that Celie undergoes.

Other than Celie there are several other characters who are victims of trauma. One of the most evident cases of trauma is that of Celie’s step-son Harpo. Harpo’s mother was murdered by her lover when Harpo was still a young boy. Harpo however comes to know about this only when Sofia’s father rejected his daughter’s hand in marriage saying that his mother was murdered. Harpo begins to have nightmares after he came to know of these incidents. Celie, in one of her letters to God writes:

Harpo be trouble with nightmares. He see his mama running cross the pasture trying to git home. Mr.—, the man they say her boyfriend, catch up with her. She got Harpo by the hand. They both running and running. He grab hold of her shoulder, say, You can't quit me now. You mine. She say, No I ain't. My place is with my children. He say, Whore, you ain't got no place. He shoot her in the stomach. She fall down. The man run. Harpo grab her in his arms, put her head in his lap. (29)

Harpo seems to be the most sensitive of Albert's children. Even the knowledge of his mother's violent death badly affects his mind. The nightmares that wake him up from his sleep are the result of his mind attempting to adjust to the traumatic events it had encountered.

Along with Harpo, his first wife Sofia also undergoes traumatic incidents. After her separation from her husband, Sofia is imprisoned for sometime in the jail for refusing to be a white woman's maid. The time in the jail weaken Sofia, physically and mentally. Sofia is one of the strongest female characters in the novel. However the lack of freedom weakens her mind. After visiting Sofia in jail the family discusses the state she is in. "Sofia not gon last, say Mr.—. yeah, say Harpo, she look little crazy to me (85). Sofia's plight underlines the atrocities that a black woman had to bear with. It emphasises both black male oppression as well as the attack from the whites, resulting in the double marginalisation that they undergo.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* deals with the story of trauma of a woman, who was pushed into traumatic situations solely because she was a woman and black. The protagonist Celie undergoes severe trauma at a very young age. She is sexually abused, her children are kidnapped, she loses her mother and the only sister she had. She is married into a loveless marriage where she was regarded as a maid. She was sexually abused by her husband and is not given even the slightest empathy. He even implements psychological trauma on her by

hiding her sister Nettie's letters. The novel develops through how Celie overcomes the various problems that she had to go through. It also focuses on her liberation from her own traumatized mind and the restrictions that her mind had imposed on herself as result of the trauma. The novel in a way shows the state of all the black women of a particular period and place.

The novel if analysed on the basis of Geoffrey H. Hartman's idea of trauma, deals with how the protagonist undergoes incomprehensible situations that remain inexperienced, though registered. This incomprehensibility, while turning Celie mute, also allows her to continue with the mundane everyday life that did not interest her. Celie raises from the ashes with the support of Shug Avery and Sofia and most importantly with the help of her creativity. She turns her sufferings into art. She begins stitching pants for all her loved ones, each pant stitched with utmost care which indicates the awakened mind free from all chains. This freedom of the mind is shown by blooming business of pants. Celie writes to Nettie,

I got pants now in every color and size under the sun. Since us started making pants down home, I ain't been able to stop. I change the cloth, I change the print, I change the waist, I change the pocket. I change the hem, I change the fullness of the leg...Pants all over her chairs, hanging all in front of the china closet. Newspaper patterns and cloth all over the table and the floor. (Walker 191)

This shows Celie's liberated self and how her mind blossoms after all the pressures over her are taken away. As Priya K points out in her "Violence in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" the novel "examines violence and its potential to act as a destabilizing agent of identity, subjectivity and selfhood and it also shows how the lines of demarcation between perpetrators, victims and observers are blurred in the face of violence" (4).

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